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ABSTRACT

When teachers base classroom discussion of literature, particularly poetry, on the authors' manuscripts, notebooks, and letters, they allow students to watch writers write and to appreciate the craft involved in creative writing. Watching the writer at work--examining the drafts and correspondence for such poems as Blake's "London" or Keats' "To Autumn"--undercuts the intimidating authority of the anthologized work while providing concrete reasons for the final version's canonization. When students examine poetry in all its stages of creation, they begin to understand its formal and linguistic demands; as they trace a poem's progress toward completion, they develop critical methods and analytic skills for questioning literature's minute particulars. Students who watch writers write share the creator's struggles, and, present at the creation, they bask in the reflected glow of a perfected work's triumph. (Author/RL)

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Shared Struggles, Shared Triumphs:

Watching Writers Write

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Shared Struggles, Shared Triumphs: Watching Writers Write

If beginning students of literature were priveleged to be present at the creation of the great works they study, they might witness the rare triumph of writing rush into existence at white heat. More likely, they would watch with astonishment and perhaps sympathy an idea struggle reluctantly into language. More sophisticated students accept the false starts, the initial inappropriate word choices, the temporary misdirection as elements attending almost all composition: literary training and personal experience join their own writing problems with those of the writers they study. But most neophytes experience an almost insuperable distance between their forays in composition and received "works"--prefaced, annotated, and carefully printed--which they encounter in their texts. Literature arrives perfect--often perfectly intimidating to students whose acquaintance with literature is limited at best. My students are astounded when I inform them that most famous writers wrestle with their creations, and that once writers overcome initial psychic snares blocking

expression, they still reject, revise, and rearrange their now-emergent words.[1] Even when she appears willing, I tell them, the Muse must be courted and coaxed. Better than tell, I use authors' manuscripts, notebooks, and letters to allow students themselves to watch writers write.

Students exhibit a range of prejudices towards poets especially, as every teacher of poetry knows. That language and poetic forms come to the poet as effortlessly as leaves to a tree and that some frenzy of inspiration results in perfect verse exploding on the page fully formed are two of the most pernicious. Of course such notions are simply nonsense. Their perniciousness, however, moves beyond error: it destroys students' sense of communion and involvement with the text. Such commonly-held beliefs retard students' motivation to explore poems. Like great pyramids, texts appear on the page complete and impregnable; probing these structures somehow violates their sanctity, destroys the spell under which they arose and were sealed. To overcome this self-defeating distance I use our canonical authors' observations on their own compositions, their self-referring language, and their notebooks to bring students into immediate contact with the process of poetic creation. The techniques and craft of poetry discussed and demonstrated in primary materials such as letters,

journals, and notebooks focus students' attention upon language and form. A poet's rejection and subsequent selection of a single word, for example, can speak to us about the imagination's creative and critical components. Observing the imagination's often fitful struggle to express itself in form and its final triumph in the perfected poem helps to humanize that remote, misunderstood magician and mystifier, the poet.

Typically, primary remains have been the reserve of scholars. The lessons available from such materials arrive to undergraduates, and especially to beginning students of literature, in lectures--if they arrive at all. But with students' increasing alienation from writing and the traditions that inform and partially determine literary creation, returning to the early stages of a poem's composition teaches us about the strictures and the freedom tradition provides, as well as about writers' attention to detail, to the particular word, or rime sound, or line arrangement. I am suggesting that we place the written work with its authority and apparently superior ontological status on the printed page within the literary experience from which it emerges. We need to bring writers' own self-illuminating words and their worksheets out of libraries and into classrooms.[2] Students who share artists' struggles partake personally in their triumphs. The experience of watching writers work

with words and forms--writing, revising, perfecting--becomes the students' own experience.

Many writers have left us the records of their literary labors, records which draw the struggling compositor close to the struggling reader. In class I emphasize laboriousness: first to convince students that rapid scanning of poetry is an injustice to the efforts of careful construction; second as a heuristic which focuses attention upon reasons for a particular word, substitution, or formal arrangement. Writers' letters attest to the difficulties encountered in composition and to such influences upon composition as season, weather, personal problems, or the looming presence of competing authors. We all identify with such shaping forces. Of course many poems first appeared as portions of letters; and if the poet has revised, comparing the epistolary with the final version often instructs. Journals, manuscripts, and notebooks provide early drafts, deletions, corrections, the detritus and determinants of poems which students normally encounter only in their final state--as if the work sprung fully formed from the writer's brain.

Admittedly, not every revision improves a composition. Keats's second version of "La Belle Dame Sans Merci," to cite a well-known example, pales before the first. But comparing the two, as I have done with lower-division surveys of British literature, focuses attention upon the

significance of individual word choices. It raises questions concerning the impact of specific language upon a poem's range of meanings, its internal coherence, and its effects upon the reader. A poet's need to revise and the process of revision itself become our subjects. Studying this process involves students with experimentation, failure, and recovery--with a gifted person's grappling with language and form. Watching writers write brings beginning students of literature into immediate and intimate contact with a literary composition, not just with its final achievement.

A few concrete examples from poets I teach suggest the range--but not the limits--of classroom possibilities offered by introducing primary materials into literature courses. William Blake's Notebook, remarkable for many poems, emblems, drawings, and prose works not otherwise printed, also contains drafts of several Songs of Innocence and of Experience.[3] Here Blake perfected a poem I am especially fond of introducing to beginning literature students, "London."

I. From Blake's Notebook:

London

I wander thro each dirty street

Near where the dirty Thames does flow

And ~~see~~ mark in every face I meet

Marks of weakness marks of woe

In every cry of every man

In ~~every voice of every child~~ every infants cry of fear

In every voice in every ban

The ~~german~~ forg mind d manacles I hear

How ed links I hear

~~But most~~ the chimney sweepers cry

~~Blackens oer the churches walls~~ Every blackning church appalls

And the hapless soldiers sigh

Runs in blood down palace walls

[In darker ink, immediately below and to the right]:

~~But~~ most the midnight harlots curse

From every dismal street I hear

Weaves around the marriage hearse

And blasts the new born infants tear

But most ~~from every~~ thro wintry streets I hear

How the midnight harlots curse

Blasts the new born infants tear

And ~~hangs~~ smites with plagues the marriage hearse

But most the shrieks of youth

But most thro midnight &c I hear

How the youthful

II. From Songs of Experience:

LONDON

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.

In every cry of every Man,
In every Infants cry of fear,
In every voice: in every ban,
The mind-forg'd manacles I hear

How the Chimney-sweepers cry
Every blackning Church appalls,
And the hapless Soldiers sigh,
Runs in blood down Palace walls

But most thro' midnight streets I hear
How the youthful Harlots curse
Blasts the new-born Infants tear
And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse[4]

The revisions Blake leaves show us a great deal. In class we note particularly his deliberate introduction of polysemous expressions, more forceful language generally and active verbs especially. We concentrate upon the poem's concomitant shift in focus from perceptible effects, from social criticism bound by time and place, and toward general causes. The class first reads the poem in its final, anthologized form. After we discuss the poem's tone and its political and social implications, I distribute photostats of the Notebook draft, including both Blake's written version and the typographic facsimile which greatly facilitates reading. Usually someone comments upon the bold strike lines; I argue that here we observe a great poet's processes of deletion and correction as he works through unsatisfactory beginnings and intermediate substitutions to the poem's final form. We are ready to focus upon differences between the final version and the earlier draft. By attending to Blake's language, we work our way to the heart of the poem.

I ask the class to concentrate upon differences between the first stanza in draft and in its final form. We note immediately the rejection of "dirty" for "charter'd." "Dirty," I inform the class, was certainly an appropriate description for both the streets and the Thames in eighteenth-century London. I then step back from the text for a moment

and ask what "charter" means. The class usually supplies a variety of definitions: a contract; a limiting decree, such as a company or city charter (and London was "chartered" during Blake's lifetime, I point out); a restraining document; a decree creating something; to hire something or someone. I emphasize the richness of the word's possible meanings and contrast it with the comparatively limited "dirty." Not only does Blake wish to suggest and underscore the causes for the city's deplorable condition, the ideas informing and determining London, we observe, he seizes upon a term whose many meanings enrich his creation. Following more tightly-focused questions, the class discovers that "charter'd" not only signals restraint, but more significantly that such restraint results from peoples' ideas--that ideas manifest themselves in forms. The original word, we conclude, never manages to carry this burden: Blake loads every rift with ore, and to students eager to learn what to look for in a poem and how to determine value in poetry, this becomes an important practical lesson. Finally in the first stanza, the more forceful "mark," which communicates the speaker's active mental notation, replaces the passive "see." The force of the city's impact upon the speaker is part of the poem's message.

Revisions in the second stanza reveal that Blake's initial concern with the politics of his time yields to his greater concern with the mind as ultimate source for present social and political conditions. In the poem's sixth line

Blake deletes the weak "every voice of every child" in favor of the more devastating "every infants cry of fear." The new line intensifies the sounds of sorrow, replacing "voice" with the repeated "cry." It emphasizes that fear infects even the earliest stages of life. Blake next eschews an initial glancing reference to German mercenaries. Here I recall for the class the Hessians who fought against American revolutionaries, and Britain's employment of military hirelings generally at this time. Students, aware that Blake concerns himself with causes, with mental acts rather than with results, discover the improvement rendered by "mind forg'd manacles." The initial word choice severely limited Blake's meaning; the powerful new line embraces as results of mental constraint every cry, every ban. A few apparently simple revisions generate lively and productive critical discourse--and with it, students' close participation in the process of a splendid poem's creation.

Blake concentrates a wide range of variously significant images in the poem's last stanza. Not surprisingly, he encountered difficulties composing it. As we note from the darker ink, immediately evident in the manuscript, this section of the poem appears to have been written after the first three stanzas. This process of literary deduction, urged upon the class by a few questions, delights many students and gives them a sense of discovery as they examine heretofore priveleged materials and draw conclusions from their examination. That Blake's concision here demands hard work from both writer and reader seems to me a point

worth making. Following this insight, we again concentrate upon the reasons informing Blake's rejection and substitution of specific language. Developing clear, critical thinking and excitement in beginning students of literature amply rewards this method of instruction. In part because of its arrangement upon the Notebook page, Blake's draft of "London" leads the eye down the page to an early draft of "The Tyger."[5] The method used to discover "London" by tracing its gestation works well with Blake's best-known lyric. Most students have heard this poem before; seeing its imperfect beginning removes it from received status and makes it, too, a work that emerged from a living hand.

In his introduction to The Odes of Keats and their Earliest Known Manuscripts, Robert Gittings writes that the Odes "are the signature and handwriting of a great spirit; and as we watch his hand physically trace them, we share to some degree in that spiritual triumph."[6] I enjoy teaching "To Autumn" because it is a great poem-- perhaps the greatest of all the odes. I can explain its greatness; and by questioning the class and commenting we elaborate successfully its technical triumphs, its chronological structure, its unselfconsciousness, its completely humanized landscape. But Keats's "spiritual triumph" embodied in the poem's acceptance of autumn and autumn's symbolic significance, its sense of an ending fully embraced and artistically realized, touches students even more deeply when they know

something about Keats's life and the relationship between the poet's response to autumn and his subsequent creation. That Keats was surrounded by death and could still compose this last of the great odes humanizes the poet, ennobles his achievement, and causes students to ponder the poem again--with new eyes. I point out that Keats's brother Tom had died a long and painful death from tuberculosis just ten months before the poem was written; that Keats cared for him through months of suffering; that within seventeen months of the poem's completion, John Keats would die of the disease possibly caught from his brother. He was already ill when he composed "To Autumn." Such perspective in my presentation yields to Keats's experiences during the autumn of 1819 which he embodies in the poem.

I read from Keats's letters (and, incidentally, mention their particular significance and the lost tradition of letter writing generally), and then we examine the poem's earliest known manuscript. Within a few days of composing "To Autumn," Keats writes to his brother and sister-in-law, "I am not certain how I should endu(r)e lonliness and bad weather together. Now the time is beautiful."[7] Keats is staying in the cathedral city of Winchester and walking a great deal daily. The poem emerges from his immediate perception of the season's beauty. In a letter to his friend, John Hamilton Reynolds, Keats observes:

> How beautiful the season is now--How fine the air. A temperate sharpness about it. Really, without joking, chaste weather--Dian skies--I never lik'd stubble fields so much as now--Aye better than the chilly green of the spring. Somehow a stubble plain looks warm--in the same way that some pictures look warm--this struck me so much in my sunday's walk that I composed upon it. (II, 167)

Keats encloses his yet untitled poem with this letter. We pause in class to consider our own responses to the stubble fields that surround our college, and to the season's progress. Students begin to feel a kinship between their own feelings about the season and those of Keats. By listening to Keats describe the actual events and feelings that result in his poem, students begin to perceive the relationship between feelings and the transformation of feelings into poetry.

I share the manuscript of "To Autumn" with my students for the same motivational and pedagogical reasons which inform our study of Blake's Notebook. Students enjoy seeing the poet's handwritten draft; considering Keats's reasons for revising focuses attention upon language and form; students feel a sense of original exploration and the rewards of reaching new insights while working with the manuscript facsimile. We concentrate upon the revised second stanza:

Who hath not seen thee? oft amid thy stores? ~~for thy haunts are many~~

Sometimes whoever seeks abroad ~~for thee~~ may find

Thee sitting careless on a granary floorr

Thy hair soft lifted by the winnowing wing

~~While bright the Sun slants through the barn;~~ husky -

on on a half reap'd furrow sound asleep

~~Or sound asleep in a half reaped field,~~

Dosed with read poppies; while thy reeping hook

~~Spares form some slumbrous~~

~~minutes while warm slumpers creep~~

Or on a half reap'd furrow sound asleep

Dos'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook

Spares the next swath and all its twined flowers

~~Spares for some slumbrous minutes the next swath;~~

And sometimes like a gleaner thost dost keep

Steady thy laden head across the brook;

Or by a Cyder-press with patent look

Thou watchest the last oozing hours by hours

(The Odes of Keats, p. 56)

I question each significant revision and challenge the class to account for the poet's choices. My students usually meet the challenge--occasionally with remarkable ingenuity

and insight. I continue to learn from their perceptions, an ancillary and unexpected benefit of this teaching method. One revision especially, Keats's replacement of "Dosed with red poppies" with "Dos'd with the fume of poppies," directs our attention to the season's intoxicating sensual appeal. Keats emphasizes the flowers' aroma rather than their more potent medicinal potential. The poem's stanza--a fusion of Shakespearean and Petrarchan sonnet stanzas--demands a rime scheme which we see Keats attempt to complete as he rejects and rearranges "Or sound asleep in a half reaped field." Watching the writer write undercuts the intimidating authority of the anthologized work while providing concrete reasons for the final version's canonization.

The manuscript contains other specific lessons as well, but the examples I offer suggest the practical possibilities and value of my method. Students respond with enthusiasm and begin to understand poetry's formal and linguistic demands as they trace a poem's progress toward completion. They develop critical methods, analytic skills, and learn to question literature's minute particulars. Students who watch writers write share the creator's struggles and, present at the creation, bask in the reflected glow of a perfected work's triumph.

Notes

[1] That some writers, like Wordsworth, Rossetti, and Yeats, repeatedly revise a single work throughout several decades greatly impresses beginning students and opens several areas of fruitful discussion concerning writing. I focus upon these areas in subsequent paragraphs.

[2] I do so regularly and successfully in several beginning and advanced literature courses. But these techniques also lend themselves to classes in creative and expository writing.

[3] I use The Notebook of William Blake: A Photographic and Typographic Facsimile, ed. David V. Erdman with Donald K. Moore (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973). The works I cite appear on N109 and N109 transcript. I show students both photographic and typographic facsimiles; I reproduce the typographic facsimile below.

[4] The Poetry and Prose of William Blake, ed. David V. Erdman with commentary by Harold Bloom (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), pp. 26-27.

[5] A fair copy of "The Tyger," struck by Blake to indicate he had transferred the poem to copper, appears on N108.

[6] (London: Heinemann, 1970), p. 16. Photographs of the manuscript of "To Autumn" to which I refer appear on pp. 57 and 59; typographic facsimiles, pp. 56 and 58, face the photographs.

[7] Hyder Edward Rollins, ed., The Letters of John Keats 1814-1821 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), II, 209. Subsequent citation refers to this edition and appears parenthetically in my text.